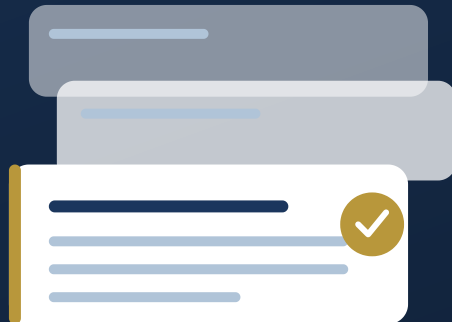


Which Review Type Should You Do?

Narrative, scoping, systematic, or umbrella, the choice depends on your question, your time, and your team. A decision guide that matches the review to the goal, from PhD methodologists.



Written by PhD methodologists researchgold.org

The review type is decided by your question, not your preference

Calling every literature summary a systematic review is a common and costly mistake. The right type follows from what you are trying to find out, how much evidence exists, and the time and team you can commit. Choosing well at the start saves you from either over-building a simple summary or under-powering an answer that needed rigour.

PRINCIPLE

Start from the question. A question that asks how large an effect is needs a systematic and possibly pooled approach. A question that asks what is out there and where the gaps are is a scoping question. A question that asks for a broad, expert overview is a narrative one. Match the method to the question, then commit to its standards.

What separates the main types

1 The narrative review

A broad, expert overview of a topic. Flexible and readable, but not built to be reproducible or exhaustive. Right for background, context, and shaping a field, not for a defensible answer to a precise question.

2 The scoping review

A structured map of a body of evidence: what exists, what kind, and where the gaps are. Uses systematic methods to search and chart, but does not usually appraise quality or pool results.

3 The systematic review

A rigorous, reproducible answer to a focused question, with a protocol, an exhaustive search, explicit eligibility, risk of bias assessment, and a structured synthesis. The standard when the answer must hold up.

4 The umbrella review

A review of existing systematic reviews on a question, used when the field is mature enough that many reviews already exist and need to be brought together.

THE COMPARISON

Match the type to your goal and your resources

Read across this table to see which type fits your question, and what each one demands of you in return.

REVIEW TYPES AT A GLANCE

Type	Best when your goal is	Search	Quality appraisal	Typical effort
Narrative	A broad expert overview or background	Selective	Not required	Lower
Scoping	To map what evidence exists and find gaps	Systematic and broad	Usually not	Moderate to high
Systematic	A defensible answer to a focused question	Exhaustive and documented	Required	High
Systematic with meta-analysis	A pooled quantitative estimate	Exhaustive and documented	Required	High
Umbrella	To synthesise existing reviews	Reviews rather than studies	Of the included reviews	Moderate to high

WATCH OUT FOR

Do not label a selective narrative review as systematic to make it sound more rigorous. Reviewers check for the markers of a systematic review, a protocol, a reproducible search, explicit eligibility, and bias assessment, and their absence in a paper that claims the title is a fast route to rejection.

Three questions that point to your answer

Answer these in order. They resolve most cases quickly, and tell you what you are committing to.

Review type decision path

1. Is your question focused and answerable (a specific effect, comparison, or estimate)?
No → you likely need a scoping review or a narrative overview.
Yes → continue.
2. Do you need the answer to be reproducible and defensible in peer review?
No → a narrative review may be enough for your purpose.
Yes → you need a systematic review.
3. Do the included studies report data that can be combined into one estimate?
Yes → systematic review with meta-analysis.
No → systematic review with structured narrative synthesis.

If many systematic reviews already answer your question:
→ consider an umbrella review of those reviews.

PRINCIPLE

Whatever the type, decide it before you search, and write the method down. The cost of a review is set by its type, and discovering halfway through that you needed a more rigorous approach is the most expensive mistake in evidence synthesis.

The specialised review types, and the standard each is held to

The four common types do not exhaust the family. When your question, evidence type, or timeline is unusual, a named methodology already exists, and each comes with its own registration route and reporting guideline that a reviewer will expect you to follow.

SPECIALISED TYPES, WHEN THEY FIT, AND THEIR REPORTING STANDARD

Type	When it fits	Registration and reporting standard
Scoping review	Map the extent and nature of evidence; no effect estimate	Not eligible for PROSPERO; report with PRISMA-ScR; JBI or Arksey and O'Malley method
Rapid review	A defensible answer under time pressure, with explicit shortcuts	Cochrane Rapid Reviews methods; state every method abridged
Living systematic review	A fast-moving field needing continual updating	A maintained systematic review with an explicit update schedule
Qualitative evidence synthesis	Synthesise qualitative studies (meta-ethnography, thematic synthesis)	eMERGe for meta-ethnography; ENTREQ reporting; rate certainty with CERQual
Diagnostic test accuracy review	Pool sensitivity and specificity of a test	QUADAS-2 appraisal; bivariate or HSROC model, not a naive pooled proportion
Realist or mixed-methods review	Explain how and why an intervention works, not just whether	RAMESES standards for realist synthesis

WATCH OUT FOR

The error that gets a paper desk-rejected is mismatching the type to its standard: registering a scoping review on PROSPERO (which does not accept them), appraising a diagnostic accuracy review with a trials tool, or letting a scoping review draw clinical conclusions it was never designed to support. A scoping review charts what exists; it does not tell you whether the intervention works. Pick the type, then commit to the registration route and reporting guideline that belong to it.

The review type checklist

If every box is ticked, you have chosen a review type that matches your question and you know what it will demand.

- ☒ You have written your question in a focused, answerable form, or accepted that it is exploratory.
- ☒ You have decided whether the answer must be reproducible and defensible.
- ☒ You know whether you intend to appraise the quality of included studies.
- ☒ You know whether you will pool results or synthesise them narratively.
- ☒ You have checked whether existing systematic reviews already cover the question.
- ☒ You have matched the effort the type demands to the time and team you have.
- ☒ You have identified the registration route and reporting guideline for your chosen type.
- ☒ You will write the chosen method into a protocol before searching.

WHEN YOU WANT THE RIGHT REVIEW DONE WELL

Match your question to the right review, and have it done with you

If you want help choosing the right type of review for your question and then carrying it out, from protocol and search through screening, appraisal, and synthesis, our PhD methodologists work through it with you to a standard that holds up in peer review. You stay the author and make every judgement call.

Get a quote for your review

researchgold.org . Written by PhD methodologists . We work in writing, on your schedule.